

Andrew Wood, "Review of *Hegemony, Mass Media, and Cultural Studies: Properties of Meaning, Power, and Value in Cultural Production* by Sean Johnson Andrews (Rowman & Littlefield)," *Lateral* 6.1 (2017).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L6.1.19>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Book Reviews

Issue 6.1 (Spring 2017)

## Review of *Hegemony, Mass Media, and Cultural Studies: Properties of Meaning, Power, and Value in Cultural Production* by Sean Johnson Andrews (Rowman & Littlefield)

**Andrew Wood**

**ABSTRACT** Sean Johnson Andrews has produced an engaging text of multifaceted value. His work, particularly the opening chapters, provides a concise history of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), the (early) Frankfurt School Critical Theory, and the Political Economy of Communication (PEC). Although the histories and notable figureheads of these schools will be broadly familiar to most scholars working in the realm of cultural studies, these opening chapters would be an excellent introduction to the field for either a general readership or students. Indeed, this would make a good textbook in many contexts.

*Hegemony, Mass Media, and Cultural Studies: Properties of Meaning, Power, and Value in Cultural Production*. By Sean Johnson Andrews. London, U.K.: Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd, 2017, 239 pp (paperback) ISBN 978-1-78348-556-7. Printed in the U.S., U.S. List: \$39.95

Sean Johnson Andrews has produced an engaging text of multifaceted value. His work, particularly the opening chapters, provides a concise history of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), the (early) Frankfurt School Critical Theory, and the Political Economy of Communication (PEC). Although the histories and notable figureheads of these schools will be broadly familiar to most scholars working in the realm of cultural studies, these opening chapters would be an excellent introduction to the field for either a general readership or students. Indeed, this would make a good textbook in many contexts.

The more scholarly and discerning reader will notice, however, that although his primary theoretical intervention is to attempt a conversation between these three methodological frameworks for the study of mass media (a useful intervention to be sure), he does at times seem to flatten out these schools of thought. Of course, it may be unreasonable for a singular book to deeply explore all of the various contributions to (primarily Anglo-American) cultural studies, yet Andrews gives the distinct impression that both CCCS and PEC represent coherent and holistic narratives, and hence ignores the very different directions taken by, for instance a Paul Gilroy or an Angela McRobbie, as opposed to the vaunted Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall.

Despite this issue, the bulk of the text offers a compelling investigation into the corporate control of commodified culture, expressed starkly at the opening of the text by Andrews's succinct claim that "someone else probably owns a significant portion of your consciousness" (1). That is, many of our cultural referents, be they the films, television or

radio programming, music, etc. many of us quote, refer to, enjoy, or daydream about on a daily basis, are mostly owned by a handful of multinational corporations. This hegemonic control (and following Gramsci, the necessary reification and enforcement of this hegemony), Andrews argues, of *most* cultural outlets by these corporations undermines the more democratic possibilities of technological expansion. This “conglomeration” is also nothing new, but indeed Andrews argues in the case of television and radio “was present almost from the beginning” (113). The particular argument Andrews advances regarding corporate ownership of such large swathes of consciousness is among the most startling, but also most convincing, aspects in his text.

Yet, for a text ostensibly about how this hegemonic control of culture affects our consciousness (both collective and individual), there is very little discussion given to what particular ideological beliefs and constructions are being reinforced. We have hints of dominant consumerism, as well as the often racialized, classed, and gendered components of it, but what of the broader elements of liberal ideology (e.g. individualism) so often attached to capital? The closest we get to this in Andrews’s text is a brief discussion of Lukács and his critique of capital’s reification, most especially when subjectivities themselves are intimately attached to the commodity (131-137).

Andrews is at his best when describing specific histories that support his overall claims regarding hegemony and cultural meaning making. These histories of the minstrel show and its afterlives, Christmas celebrations, Shakespearean performances, and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* should be of interest to both a general and a scholarly readership. Additionally, his attention to the changes brought to cultural production and (particularly) consumption by big data and the commodification of YouTube and user-generated content is an interesting and useful intervention.

The biggest question I have following Andrews’s text is, where are the possibilities for resistance? Despite his attention to controversies of ownership surrounding sampling in hip-hop and mash-up musical forms, surely there are other tactics, perhaps in less straightforward ways, in which artists and consumers have resisted corporate hegemonic ownership of cultural commodities. What are some of the other ways in which the “monopoly capitalism” of copyright laws can be resisted (Andrews 44, 45, 63, 66)?

He mentions fan fiction (and other articulations of fan culture), for example, as an outlet for the creative play with corporate owned entities, but doesn’t deeply consider whether these fan outlets and spaces are resistant, reifying, contested, consensus or dissensus based, neutral, or problematic. Instead, he prefers to simply refer to them as “valorizing,” and involved in the meaning-making feedback loop of cultural production and consumption. Does the interaction with a commodity culture (or cultural commodity) by fans, or audiences more broadly, move in directions other than valorization? Are there instances, for example, in which audiences may indeed *de*-value or undermine a given work or commodity culture more broadly?

The biggest struggle, he argues, for counterhegemonic movements is to produce content at the same “temperature” and perceived legitimacy as the big corporations (Andrews 91). This claim is surely correct, given all of the obstacles of access, capital, and technology faced. Yet, somehow these counterhegemonic moves are still made, even if at a lower, hidden, or obscured level. The biggest and most hopeful example Andrews provides is the collectively produced online resource Wikipedia, which has effectively undermined competing for-profit encyclopedias like Britannica. What can we make of this persistence in resistance? Can we think about something like do-it-yourself (DIY) productions as resisting the hegemonic mode of commodified culture? What about the looping back of non-commodity productions (e.g. Banksy), that then become commodified and sold

(though not copy-written) without the consent of the artist(s)? Is a discussion of surplus or excess, so often discussed in political economic theory, also relevant to an investigation of hegemonic, commodified culture? These questions are left largely unanswered and open for the readers to explore.

 [Bio](#)



### **Andrew Wood**

Andrew J. Wood is an educator, writer, activist, and a Ph.D. candidate in political theory at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Influenced by an eclectic amalgamation of philosophy, political thought, music, poetics, economics, literature, and aesthetics, his work broadly addresses political imagination and radical social change through visual, sonic, and affective registers often disregarded by traditional social scientific paradigms.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY) License, unless otherwise noted.  
ISSN 2469-4053